Eudaimonia, Apatheia, Ataraxia and Hesychasm: How St Gregory Palamas' Views on Hesychasm and Asceticism Solve Problems with the Often-Misunderstood Ancient Greek Moral Concepts of Eudaimonia, Apatheia, and Ataraxia

CONSTANTINOS ATHANASOPOULOS
Research Associate,
Department of Philosophy, Open University, UK

In this work, I examine how we can use St Gregory Palamas' views on hesychasm and asceticism to solve key problems associated with Aristotelian *eudaimonia*, Stoic *apatheia*, and Epicurean *ataraxia*. The problems of social interaction and lack of knowledge regarding the intentions of others presents a serious problem for Aristotelian *eudaimonia*. For Epicurean *ataraxia*, the fleeting nature of pleasure presents further problems, and the Stoic ideal of *apatheia* is too stable to be real. St Gregory Palamas knew these limitations of Ancient Greek ethics very well and proposed *hesychia* and *ascesis* as the true answer to moral dilemmas and the pursuit of true *eudaimonia*.

Introduction: Why is this Topic Relevant to Palamite Studies?

It is almost seven hundred years since the Orthodox Church declared that the positions of Barlaam and his follower Akindynos were heretical and should be condemned, at the Council of 1341 (which is regarded by many as the Ninth Ecumenical Council, and is otherwise known as the Fifth Council of Constantinople). Gregory Palamas was declared a saint in 1368, and soon after, the Orthodox Church asserted that the Sunday following the Sunday of Orthodoxy during Lent was to take his name, so as to remind believers that Palamas' theology is a continuation of Orthodox theology upholding the veneration of icons, which was defended at the Seventh Ecumenical Council of 787. During the Sunday of Palamas, the *Hagioritic Tome* (a text signed by the Holy Community of Mt Athos and other Orthodox Church representatives which condemns the heretical positions of Barlaam and his two followers, Akindynos and Gregoras) is traditionally read at the Patriarchate of Constantinople and Orthodox monasteries worldwide to remind believers of the

heresies and the heretics that pushed Orthodoxy into a bitter civil war lasting for more than ten years (in a similar fashion to the civil war over the veneration of the icons, which lasted for more than a hundred years in the seventh to eighth centuries).

One would expect that after seven hundred years, Palamas' theology would be taken for granted. But this is far from being the case. Palamas' thought, both in terms of his theological positions and the philosophical background of these positions, is the target of many orthodox as well as non-orthodox contemporary philosophers and theologians. Their common approach is to find inconsistencies and problems in Palamas' texts that demonstrate either that his philosophy is poor or that his theology is problematic, suggesting, in the case of his philosophy, that Palamas did not understand some key positions in the Aristotelian corpus (or that his logic in his philosophical discussion is flawed) and, in the case of his theology, that he commits heresy in one way or another. I have discussed the poor basis of some of their worries regarding Palamas' use of key Aristotelian ideas in metaphysics and logic in a past paper.[1] In this work, I discuss why Palamas' views on asceticism can be seen as an improvement on Ancient Greek debates about *eudaimonia* and *ataraxia*. Obviously, those who oppose Palamas on the grounds that he is either a poor Aristotelian or that he confuses important Ancient Greek concepts and terms will disagree with me. This strategy was widely used by all the philosophers and theologians who first attacked Palamas seven hundred years ago. Contemporary critics of Palmas make use of the same strategy. It differs slightly from the strategy of some other contemporary commentators (again originating from both inside and outside Orthodoxy) who claim that Palamas' thought is similar to that of Aquinas. However, the end result of both strategies is the same: they attempt to turn Palamas' theology and philosophy into some kind of non-Orthodox pan-ecumenism, which can be dismissed at a later date as being too confused or too confusing to make any sense. My aim moves in a different direction: I respect the Orthodox character of Palamas' theology and philosophy and try to present clearly the significance of his ideas for today's problems in philosophy and theology. I will examine three key concepts in Ancient Greek ethics: *eudaimonia* (which for the followers of Aristotle is an end in itself and most valuable), *apatheia* (which has a similar value for the followers of Stoicism), and *ataraxia* (which has a similar value for the followers of Epicureanism). I will examine their differences in approach and compare them to Palamas' teachings about asceticism and salvation, trying to establish how Palamas' views are able to overcome the intrinsic theoretical difficulties of the Greek terms. Beyond any doubt, the terms had a long history before Aristotle (they were used in Plato and the Pre-Socratics), but focusing on the use made by the Aristotelians, the

[1] C. Athanasopoulos, 'Demonstration (*Ἀπόδειξις*) and its Problems for St Gregory Palamas: Some Neglected Aristotelian Aspects of St Gregory Palamas' Philosophy and Theology', in *The Ways of Byzantine Philosophy*, ed. Mikonja Knezevic (Alhambra, CA: Sebastian Press, 2015), 361–74.

Stoics, and the Epicureans, three key schools of Ancient Greek ethics, will provide enough background for a comparison with Palamas.

Eudaimonia in Aristotle (384–22 BC)

Before I begin discussing Aristotle's views on *eudaimonia*, I would like to mention that the usual English translation of the term (i.e., 'happiness') is not appropriate. A much better translation is 'blessed by the gods', since a *daimon* is a god or a messenger of gods. A somewhat better translation than 'happiness' might be 'living well and faring well', but this again does not adequately express the meaning the term would have had for an Ancient Greek.[2] Aristotle provides in the *Nicomachean Ethics* both a formal definition of *eudaimonia* (i.e., the general principles that one could have in mind when considering the application of the term) and a material definition (i.e., Aristotle examines what kind of lives satisfy these principles of the term's use).

Aristotle begins his examination of what is considered good in *Nicomachean Ethics* through an analysis of many kinds of 'goods' or ends for which we do things: some are considered valuable for the sake of other 'goods', some are good (valuable) in themselves. He points out in the first book that *eudaimonia* is a good that we desire for its own sake (1095a15–22).[3]

Overall, from Aristotle's discussion of *eudaimonia* in the *Nicomachean Ethics* we can establish that it has three key characteristics:

1. Aristotle does not think of *eudaimonia* as a psychological state, nor as a state of the mind, but as relating to an activity—the activity of living with virtues. A good life is one that realises the full potential of a human life (1098b30–1).
2. *Eudaimonia* is not something subjective, dependent on the way people perceive it individually. For Aristotle, it is an objective value, independent of people's perception thereof. It relates to an objective judgement about one's life as a good human life. It does not say anything (directly) about one's state of mind; nor is it a judgement over which the person making it has any special authority. By contrast, if someone says they are happy or unhappy, it is difficult to correct them or to even know better than the person claiming they are happy or unhappy.
3. *Eudaimonia* is not something easily changed. It does not come and go as happiness (in the usual sense) does. This is so because it is an evaluation of a life lived well or of a person (a good person) as a whole (i.e., considering the

[2] I am not alone in rejecting the 'happiness' translation; for example, Nussbaum overall avoids translating the term, and prefers Cooper's 'flourishing', see Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, Revised Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001 [1986]), 6.

[3] *Ethica Nicomachea*, ed. J. Bywater (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894).

life of a person in its totality). Usually, for Aristotle, *eudaimonia* is evaluated as such only after a stable way of life is established. This agrees with the beliefs of most Ancient Greeks that *eudaimonia* would be determined after death (things that take place after death are as important as things that take place during life). See, for example, Homer's description of Achilles, when he was visited by Odysseus in Book 11 of *The Odyssey*; see also the portrayal of the characters of Oedipus Rex and Antigone in Sophocles' plays, etc.

Aristotle also insists that *eudaimonia* is not about:
a) Pleasure (because some people pursue animal pleasures and we are looking for something that is related only to humans);
b) Money and honour (because they are means to further ends);
c) Virtue (because virtue is compatible with inactivity, great misfortune and pain). *Eudaimonia* is the activity of the rational soul which acts in accordance with virtue, but it is not the virtues themselves, because someone can claim to have virtue without having *eudaimonia* (1099a31–b6; 1153b17–19; cf. 1098a16–1102a5).

For Aristotle, *eudaimonia* is the only good pursued for its own sake and not as a means to another end. He thus believes that *eudaimonia* is a final end without qualification. It is also self-sufficient; it cannot be made more desirable by adding something else to it. If we are to add some other good to it—for example, knowledge—it is only so as to make that other thing part of *eudaimonia*. *Eudaimonia* is the only self-sufficient good.

Of particular importance for our discussion on *eudaimonia* are books 6 and 10 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In Book 10, Aristotle claims that *eudaimonia* must involve pleasure, but not just any pleasure; only the pleasure of doing good is valuable for *eudaimonia*. What is truly pleasant is what is pleasant to the good person, and this is a life of virtuous activity, not a life of mere amusement. In Book 6, he considers what kind of reason is relevant to *eudaimonia*; he finds that both the practical and the theoretical reasons are important and necessary for it. And while certain animals may have practical reason, only humans have theoretical reason. This ability is our share in 'divinity'. *Eudaimonia*, therefore, must include an excellent activity of theoretical reason, which is philosophy. Theoretical reason is far more important than practical reason (both are needed, but the theoretical one is more important), because:

1. It is the best activity in which we can engage: with it we contemplate what is best (the greatest and most divine things in the universe) and not merely what is best for us (as in practical wisdom).
2. We can engage more continuously in it than in anything else, therefore it leads to continuous *eudaimonia*.

3. It leads to pure and lasting pleasures as well as to more leisure for worthy and *eudaimonia*-related actions.
4. It is the most self-sufficient activity related to *eudaimonia*.
5. It is more related to what makes us characteristically human and differentiates us from animals. Given our nature, it is the most pleasurable thing we can engage in. We get pleasures through it, which we cannot get via anything else.

In the later books of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle also claims that having good friends who are virtuous and engaged in good life projects, as well as being part of a well-organised *polis* and living harmoniously with others in a society, are also important factors of *eudaimonia* (even though they are not as important as engaging in activities related to theoretical reason, like philosophy, mathematics, etc.).

But here arises the problem of ignorance regarding the intentions of others as well as the issue the development of their moral virtues independently from our control, pointing to the ever present problem of moral vulnerability (for example in the case of a friend who was good but now has turned to evil). The problem of moral vulnerability points out more problems linked to the Aristotelian theory of virtue and to how it relates to Aristotle's theory of *eudaimonia*.[4] Aristotle recognises this in his *Poetics* (relatively unknown in the Medieval West but widely studied in the Eastern Byzantium), where he discusses tragedy. This awareness of the Aristotelian discussion of the unavoidable character of tragedy in human affairs is what pushes the East into asceticism and hesychasm. I wish to claim that asceticism and hesychasm, as practiced by St Gregory Palamas and his followers, is not only their attempt to live in a Christian way, observing the traditions of the Orthodox Fathers, but that it is also the result and fruit of much thought on problems in the Aristotelian intuitions on the human predicament. Let us look at some of these problems.

a) What is the exact relation between virtues and *eudaimonia*? Can someone be *eudaimon* without actively engaging in virtuous behaviour? For Aristotle, virtuous activity seems to be important, but he also insists that *eudaimonia* is not itself a type of virtue, and that one can be virtuous without being *eudaimon*. Some have claimed that virtue is not important; others that it is important, but only when seen as an activity of theoretical reason, and/or that someone can engage in the activity of theoretical reason without being virtuous.

Kraut (following here Eastern Byzantine and Western Medieval commentators) claims that for Aristotle, in order to engage in theoretical reason, we have to have lived a virtuous life and to have pursued virtues actively.[5] If we have not achieved an

[4] See a relevant discussion of the problem in Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, 343–72.
[5] R. Kraut, *Aristotle on the Human Good* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 15–78.

active engagement with the virtues, we will not be able to engage in the activity of theoretical reason for long. But Aristotle leaves this unclear, and he also associates *eudaimonia* with the existence of friends, family and material goods, which are not related to theoretical reason and are not related to virtue as such.

b) How important is recognition from others? Even though there is no dispute that *eudaimonia* for Aristotle is something objective, how important is recognition (i.e., of one's virtues, etc.) from others? Kraut[6] thinks that this recognition is important both psychologically and in terms of the objectivity of *eudaimonia*. However, note that the problem of moral vulnerability described above, of which Aristotle himself was aware, makes the necessity of friends a problem in Aristotle's theory of *eudaimonia*. Commentators of East and West are divided on this point.

The hesychastic and ascetic tradition that developed in the East to the point of being the pre-dominant form of monasticism in later Byzantine times, tried to distance the discussion about true *eudaimonia* from the existence of friends and material goods (see, for example, the Areopagite texts, the Desert Fathers, St John of Sinai, and St Symeon the New Theologian). St Gregory Palamas follows in this tradition, and especially the way it was developed on the Holy Mountain by the Hesychast Fathers there.

c) Is it an ongoing process or an evaluation at a final stage of life (or even a post-mortem evaluation)? Aristotle's views on this are not clear. In some instances he maintains that life is important for *eudaimonia* (because without it we cannot enjoy material goods). In other instances, he goes against this (for example because life pursuits provide obstacles for the full exercise of theoretical reasoning). Again, the commentators in the East and the West are divided on this. In the West, there is no clear indication either way. On the other hand, most Eastern Byzantine commentators claim that it takes place at the final stage, and most concur with the idea of a post-mortem evaluation. This is the school of thought in which St Gregory Palamas was educated (by Theodoros Metochites), and this is why, on this particular issue, he would not have considered the Aristotelian understanding of *eudaimonia* to be too different from his own.

d) Is it related to rest or to an activity? Both in the West and in the East, commentators are divided on this. However in the Medieval West, most commentators have interpreted Aristotle's idea of *eudaimonia* in an active way, practiced through works of charity.[7] In the East, *eudaimonia* is related more

[6] Ibid.

[7] See, for example, Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, First Part of the Second Part 65, and Second Part of the Second Part 23, translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Cincinnati and Chicago: Benziger Brothers, 1947).

to a state of wellbeing and bliss that comes as the result of activity. As such, for most of the Eastern commentators near the time of Palamas, *eudaimonia* is related more to contemplation and prayer.

e) What is the relation of *eudaimonia* to the gods? As I indicated above, for most ancient Greeks *eudaimonia* is related to the gods. A person committing *hubris* against the gods would not be *eudaimon*. Up to the fifteenth century, there was unanimity among the commentators (Eastern and Western) that approval by the gods (or from God in Christian times) is essential. From the period of the Enlightenment onwards, however, there is very little discussion of this among the non-Christian commentators of Aristotle.

f) Inclusive of other elements or not? This problem relates to the tension between the formal and material definitions of *eudaimonia*. In the past, the West emphasised the exercise of theoretical reason (logic and metaphysics) as being the most important characteristic of *eudaimonia*, to the point that a madman or someone with very low mental abilities could not be considered to be *eudaimon*. The East emphasised goodness as being more important.[8] Currently, the debate is framed differently, and even though there are those who highlight the aspect of goodness in *eudaimonia,* they do not emphasise the connection between goodness and *eudaimonia*, and a relationship with God.[9]

Attempts by Stoicism (300–201 BC) and Epicureanism (300–201 BC) to Meet the Problems in Aristotle's Eudaimonia

Both Stoics and Epicureans relate *apatheia* and *ataraxia* with *eudaimonia*. Realising the problems described above in Aristotle's theory, the Stoics emphasise the exercise of the rational faculties for achieving *eudaimonia,* while the Epicureans affirm the non-cognitive elements of human motivation (putting emphasis on pleasure and avoidance of pain) and believe that the best route to *eudaimonia* comes from *ataraxia*.

There are slight differences among the Stoics on the role of judgements in emotions, but overall, they believe that the passions (*pathē* or *πάθη*) have both cognitive (dependent on judgement) and non-cognitive elements, and while we can control the cognitive elements (our judgements in relation to them), we have no control over the non-cognitive ones. The only thing we can do with our reason is to pursue virtue, by having the right intentions (*prohairesis*) and eradicating the cognitive elements that motivate us towards what the Stoics consider as

[8] C. Athanasopoulos, 'The Influence of Ps.Dionysius the Areopagite on Johannes Scotus Eriugena and St Gregory Palamas: Goodness as Transcendence of Metaphysics' in *Being or Good? Metamorphoses of Neoplatonism*, ed. Agnieska Kijewska (Lublin: Catholic University of Lublin Press [KUL], 2004), 319–41.

[9] For example, Kraut, in *Aristotle on the Human Good*, 15–78, makes a similar move.

bad passions. We can instead turn our attention towards the good passions which will motivate us in life according to our nature and reason, so that we can become *eupathēs* towards the good passions like watchfulness (*eulaveia*) and joy (*chara*).[10] In their ethical system, Stoics accepted that there are morally indifferent things (i.e., actions that have no moral value) and that we should not have a motivation for these. This brought them into trouble, and there were critics in ancient times (e.g., Seneca and Aristo) who highlighted the fact that once they allowed for moral indifference in their system, it becomes difficult for the Stoics to argue that these actions should be avoided.[11] Others argued against the Stoics' naturalistic views, claiming that their position of moral indifference toward certain things is incompatible with their naturalism, and that their emphasis on the fact that life according to nature is a good thing goes against their claim that *eudaimonia* is closely connected to a virtuous life.[12] Certain other critics have emphasised that the Stoic has no motivation to do good if this necessitates misery, trouble or discomfort, and as such the Stoic would avoid doing good in most instances, emptying their concept of virtue of all content.[13] In the West, there is much discussion about the Stoic influences on St Paul's Epistles and the Gospel according to St Matthew.[14] This discussion also existed in Medieval times, but did not result in an agreement over the extent of these influences. Augustine and the early Latin Fathers (for example Jerome) saw great problems in *apatheia* and used it to attack Pelagius;[15] Avicenna used and criticised Stoic positions, and Aquinas used much of the critiques of Augustine and Avicenna.[16] In more recent times, Erasmus, Adam Smith, and Frances Hutcheson wished to promote a Christian form of Stoicism and tried to build on what was accepted as 'Natural Theology', with Hume criticising their belief in reason existing in nature, arguing that this cannot be proven.[17] There are differences in the way that the East discussed Stoic ethical positions. Some (Desert Fathers, especially Evagrius of Pontus and the Cappadocians) aimed at re-evaluating and re-signifying *apatheia;*[18] others tried to disassociate themselves from Stoic philosophical psychol-

[10] Richard Sorabji, *Emotion and Peace of Mind: From Stoic Agitation to Christian Temptation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 157–60.

[11] F. H., Sandbach, *The Stoics*, second edition (London: Duckworth, 1989 [1975]), 28–45.

[12] Ibid.

[13] T. Wiersma, *Stoic Notes*, trans. S. Field (Utrecht: Atalanda, 2014), 157–60.

[14] M. L. Colish,, 'Pauline Theology and Stoic Philosophy: An Historical Study', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 48, no.1 (1979): 129–39; D. Desilva, 'Paul and the Stoa: A Comparison', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 38, no. 4 (December 1995): 549–64; T. Engberg-Pedersen, 'A Stoic Understanding of Pneuma in Paul', in *Philosophy at the Roots of Christianity*, ed. Troels Engberg-Pedersen and Henrik Tronier (Copenhagen: Faculty of Theology, University of Copenhagen, 2006), 101–23.

[15] See Sorabji, *Emotion and Peace of Mind*, 400–18.

[16] See S. Knuuttila, *Emotions in Ancient and Medieval Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[17] R. Dealy, *The Stoic Origins of Erasmus' Philosophy of Christ,* (Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 2017); P. H. Clarke, 'Adam Smith, Stoicism, and Religion in the Eighteenth Century', *History of the Human Sciences* 13, no. 4 (2000): 49–72.

[18] See Sorabji, *Emotion and Peace of Mind*, 343–71.

ogy and ethical positions altogether (see St John of the Ladder and St Symeon the New Theologian).

The Epicurean emphasis on *ataraxia* also involved considerable difficulties. For Epicurus, *eudaimonia* is a life with pleasure, which is the ultimate good, and devoid of pain, which is the ultimate evil. In this hedonistic system, absence of physical pain (*aponia*) and absence of mental disturbance and anxiety of all kinds (*ataraxia*) is what we should aim for with our actions, in order to achieve *eudaimonia*. *Ataraxia* is achieved when we reach the state of a well-balanced soul, a certain kind of psychic harmony devoid of anxiety, distress, and pain, that is somewhat stable (*katastema*) over time.[19] But the very hedonistic basis of the Epicurean conception of *eudaimonia* and *ataraxia* makes these concepts problematic. Epicurus and his followers seem to think that the hedonistic basis of their theory (i.e., that seeking pleasure and avoiding pain) is the only certain motivation and that it is a given beyond any doubt. From ancient times however, critics focused on the impossibility of verifying this hedonistic basis of the Epicurean theory. The writings of Epicurus seem to suggest that their theory is a form of Descriptive Hedonism, but in some parts of these writings there is the suggestion that people actually should pursue hedonism in order to achieve *eudaimonia*, indicating that their theory admits some form of normative hedonism. Both versions of hedonism are problematic in their hedonistic presumptions, and they are incompatible in terms of what they take morality to be. Overall, they go against our normal everyday moral intuitions: is absence of pain the same as pleasure (as the Epicurean discussion of *ataraxia* implies)? What happens when someone does not derive pleasure from the activities that most people find pleasurable? What happens when absence of pain makes life so boring that it is unbearable to live? Epicurus insists that, when faced with death, we should have *ataraxia* and not be afraid of it nor be saddened by it. But how far is this possible? Epicureans were from ancient times asked to reply to these kinds of criticisms, and they have yet to find a convincing answer.

Both Stoics and Epicureans used *ataraxia* in their discussions of *eudaimonia*. But their conceptions differ significantly. The Epicurean conception of *ataraxia* refers to the present state of the person who has *eudaimonia*; this may change over time and when it does, the person stops having *eudaimonia*. He tries to go back to this state by thinking of all the pleasurable things associated with his misfortune, but again he may lose this achievement. For the Stoics, it is a state that does not change at all, or at least one more difficult to change than the Epicurean conception. True *ataraxia* for the Stoics can only be achieved by the sage who will not be moved away from this state, no matter what comes upon him. The *ataraxia* of the Stoic sage is the crown achievement of his life due to the wisdom attained and the cultivation of his reason to an excellent degree, and this is the result of his *apatheia*. The Epicurean con-

[19] M. Erler and M. Schofield, 'Epicurean Ethics', in *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, ed. Keimpe Algra (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 642–74.

ception of *ataraxia* shares more common elements with Pyrrho and the Pyrrhonist Sceptics and less with the Stoic conception. For Pyrrho, continuous and severe scepticism about all values will bring about a certain state of the mind where nothing really matters. This is what he thought *ataraxia* to be. By achieving this *ataraxia* the sceptic can rest. But this rest is short lived, because his strong desire to criticise and refute accepted truths will push him out of his rest, out of his *ataraxia*. However, while for the Stoics and the Epicureans *ataraxia* was tied to a conception of the ultimate good, the Sceptics could not tie it to any conception of ultimate good; for this reason, the Stoic and the Epicurean conceptions of *ataraxia* in Ancient Greek ethics were more successful than the Sceptics' use of the term.[20] However, let me emphasise that, as in the case of Aristotle, both the Epicureans and the Stoics, even with their more developed ideas of *apatheia* and *ataraxia*, failed to provide a theory about *eudaimonia* that would be without theoretical difficulties, and which would be suited to what most people feel and do in their moral lives, especially in terms of fear of death and the unavoidable feeling of pain.

St Gregory Palamas on Eudaimonia.

By *eudaimonia,* St Gregory Palamas (1296–1359) understands salvation and union with God. In terms of using metaphysics and epistemology for achieving *eudaimonia*, he would not accept Aristotelian, Stoic, Thomistic, and Avicennian intuitions. He would instead opt into the realm of ethics and would maintain that ethics should control metaphysics and epistemology as far as this is possible. In the medieval debate of Being vs. Good, St Gregory Palamas responds by claiming that goodness (not conceived as virtue, but as true repentance through prayer) is more important than knowledge of being. This not only brings back an essential Aristotelian agenda, but also agrees with most of the Aristotelian commentators in the East.[21]

Barlaam's charge of *omfaloskopoi* against the hesychastic monks of Mount Athos and all other such attempts to discredit hesychasm in the fourteenth century can only be understood within the specific metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical context of the time. It was an attempt to ridicule the endeavours of the hesychasts by the learned humanist intellectuals of Constantinople, who found an ideological refuge in Barlaam of Calabria (c.1290–1348), after the condemnation and excommunication of Johannes Italus (1025–85). The agenda was Aristotelian: is theoretical reason as important as practical reason and virtuous behaviour, or is it not? Barlaam claimed that theoretical reason was the most important form of reason. St Gregory Palamas came to the rescue of the Hesychastic Fathers of Mount Athos and claimed

[20] Gisela Striker, '*Ataraxia*: Happiness as Tranquility', *Monist* 73, no.1 (1990): 97–111.
[21] See Athanasopoulos, 'The Influence of Ps.Dionysius the Areopagite'.

that Aristotelian fixations regarding the role of theoretical reason, practical reason, as well as virtue, amount to nothing by themselves.

Palamas' intervention brought forward an ascetic and hesychastic solution to the Aristotelian problems: true *eudaimonia* (even though short-lived during one's earthly life) can only be achieved through divine grace and union with God. Praying truthfully and incessantly with true repentance in a hesychastic context is a pre-requisite for this union with God, but ultimately it will depend on God's will. This hesychastic approach to *eudaimonia* has the following four key elements:

a) incessant prayer and compunction,
b) living in an environment conducive to prayer,
c) participating in the Mysteries of the Church, and
d) guidance from a more experienced hesychastic Elder (spiritual father).

I will limit my discussion of Palamas' texts to the specific discussion of *eudaimonia* as found in the *Triads*, in his small treatise entitled: *On Light and Divine Illumination and Holy Eudaimonia and Perfection according to Christ*.[22] One can find these ideas in many other texts contained in the five volumes of Palamite writings edited by P. Chrestou, but due to the limitations in the scope of my study here, I will limit my discussion to this small treatise found in the second volume.

In this treatise—which essentially is a reply to a question about the nature of the divine light that the hesychasts claim the Apostles saw on Mount Tabor during the Holy Transfiguration of Christ—St Gregory Palamas notes that engaging in philosophical pursuits is not essential for salvation; humility is more important. To believe that one could reach perfection through the philosophical methods of division (*diairesis*), analysis, and synthesis is the heretical dogma of the Greek philosophers of the past.

He mentions here the Pythagoreans and the Stoics, who (according to Palamas) state that the end and goal of true knowledge is the theoretical knowledge attained by the philosophical study of things.[23] He also stresses that people who think they can reach the truth and thus salvation through philosophy alone, are deluded. For the hesychasts, work and lived experience are also important. For the Saint, if one is to be limited to words alone, there will be no end to debates and scepticism (alluding here to the impossibility of *ataraxia* during *skepsis*). As he notes, for the hesychasts, to each word there is always 'a contrary word'; what can be contrary to a lived experience itself ('*Λόγῳ' γάρ, φησί*, '*παλαίει πᾶς λόγος*', *βίῳ δέ τίς*;)?[24] He also makes the following interesting remark: the ones who think that they can approach

[22] Π. Χρήστου, επιμ., *Γρηγορίου Παλαμᾶ, τὰ Συγγράμματα,* τ. 2 (Θεσσαλονίκη, 1961–1992), 151–259.

[23] Ibid. *Εἰ δέ παρά τῶν πάντα ἀνακρίνειν δυναμένων ἐν ταπεινώσει προσελθόντες ἠθέλησαν τήν ἀλήθειαν μαθεῖν, ἤκουσαν ἄν ὡς τοῦτο τό δόγμα φρονήματός ἐστιν ἑλληνικοῦ. Στωικῶν τε καί Πυθαγορείων αἵρεσις, οἵ τήν ἐπιστήμην τέλος λέγουσι τῆς θεωρίας προσγινομένην διά τῆς τῶν μαθημάτων ἀναλήψεως.*

[24] Ibid.

true knowledge only through philosophy do not know how poor they are in their knowledge of themselves.[25] It is only through painful compunction and strict *askesis*, that someone can steer his mind away from evil and the mental disease of pride, and make his mind suitable to receive the truth.[26]

In a later passage, St Gregory Palamas uses a variety of ancient Greek terms to describe what the ones who wish to approach God exclusively via the philosophical methods will never be able to attain (note the use of *katastema*, *anapausis*, *pathē* and *hēdonē*, all frequently used by Aristoteleians, Stoics, and Epicureans): '*οὐ κατάστασιν λογισμῶν, οὐκ ἀνάπαυσιν πνευματικήν...οὐ κατάπαυσιν ἡδονῶν τε καί παθῶν, οὐ διάθεσιν ψυχῆς ἀρίστην*'.[27] The rest from continuous debates and the achievement of true *eudaimonia* (which for Palamas, allows for all the above spiritual conditions, that is, rest of soul and a perfect temperament in the soul) comes via actions permitted by divine grace: '*τά τῆς χάριτος ἐνεργήματα*'.

Palamas mentions here the Hesychastic Fathers' view that, to support the view that no one in this world can see divine light is 'of the wolves'—'*τοῦ μέρους τῶν λύκων ἐστί*'—alluding to the idea oft cited in New Testament that heretics will attempt to misguide the Church and its faithful in the form of wolves attacking the flock.[28] His reason for supporting this claim is that the hesychasts believe that a human *apatheia* (and not an angelic one, agreeing here with Orthodox patristic anthropology) is achievable through divine grace, even though it is short-lived. The heretics believe that this is impossible for all humans who are susceptible to sin. For the hesychasts however, God's intervention necessitates a liberation from sin, even as a temporary measure, that is enough for humans to experience God's Divine Light on a short-term basis, and in this way, be continuously motivated towards divine *eudaimonia*. This process has different stages, but is experienced with the presence of the Holy Spirit and thus certain.[29]

Palamas also supports his claims with the words of Neilos the Ascetic (c. fifth century AD), who claims that when the Holy Spirit sees that the prayer is true and full of compunction, it stops the army of mental disturbances and brings peace

[25] Ibid.

[26] *Καί μήν οὐδέ ἑαυτόν γνῶναι δυνηθῆναί τινα οἰόμεθα διαιρετικαῖς καί συλλογιστικαῖς καί ἀναλυτικαῖς μεθόδοις, ἄν μή δι᾽ ἐπιπόνου μετανοίας καί ἀσκήσεως συντόνου, ἄτυφον καί ἀπόνηρον ποιήσῃ τόν οἰκεῖον νοῦν. Ὁ γάρ μή τοιοῦτον καί οὕτω τόν ἑαυτοῦ κατασκεύσας νοῦν, οὐδέ τήν οἰκείαν κατά γνῶσιν εἴσεται πενίαν, ὅ τοῦ γνῶναί τινα ἑαυτόν ἐστιν ἀρχή λυσιτελής.*

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid. See Acts 20:29; Matthew 7:15.

[29] Ibid. *Ἀπάθεια γοῦν ἐν ἀνθρώποις οὐκ ἀγγέλων ἀλλ᾽ ἀνθρωπίνη ζητεῖται, ἥν γνώσῃ καί οὐκ ἀπατηθήσῃ ἐν σεαυτῷ οὖσαν κατά τόν αὐτόν ἅγιον ἐν πλήθει φωτός ἀρρήτου καί προσευχῆς ἔρωτι ἀμυθήτῳ· καί πάλιν, 'ψυχή προλήψεως ἐλευθερωθεῖσα πάντως θεῖον φῶς ἐθεάσατο· γνῶσιν δέ δογμάτων θείων, πόσοι μετά πολληρήψεων ἔχουσι;' καί πάλιν, 'ἐξ ἄλλων μέν οἱ τῇ ψυχῇ ἀσθενεῖς γνωρίζουσι τήν πρός ἑαυτούς τοῦ Κυρίου ἐπίσκεψιν, οἱ δέ τέλειοι ἐκ τῆς τοῦ Πνεύματος παρουσίας'· καί πάλιν, 'ἐν μέν τοῖς εἰσαγωγικοῖς πληροφορία τοῦ κατά Θεόν εἶναι αὐτῶν τά διαβήματα ἡ τῆς ταπεινώσεώς ἐστι προσθήκη· ἐν δέ τοῖς μέσοις, ἡ τῶν πολέμων ἀναχώρησις· ἐν δέ τοῖς τελείοις, ἡ τοῦ θείου φωτός προσθήκη καί περιουσία'.*

to the mind and the soul.[30] Finally, confirming the truth he has received from the Hesychastic Fathers, Palamas notes that this divinely inspired *eudaimonia* is experience-based, pleasurable, and not like any other. In this way, it cannot be communicated by words to someone who has no experience of this, and thus cannot understand it.[31]Palamas' understanding of spiritual pleasure, described above as 'sweetness which is beyond description', stands in opposition to the Ancient Greek conception of pleasure (*ἡδονή*), which is primarily understood in material or bodily terms. Aristotle considers it to be primarily material and dependent on the peculiarities and differences between each living being.[32] Epicurus seems to have a similar idea.[33] For Stoics, pleasure (together with sorrow) is to be avoided by the wise men, because it clouds the mind.[34] In this way, pleasure for the Stoics is alien to reasoning abilities and skills (which the wise are supposed to cultivate), and is in this way alien to the true spiritual dimension of human beings. Palamas, here, is following St Maximus the Confessor (and other Fathers of the Church) who stresses that the need for pleasure and sorrow in human affairs comes after the exit from Paradise. In Paradise, God gave to man a natural desire to seek and know God. Man twisted this desire in order to get access to and knowledge of material things. For this he left Paradise. God allows the existence of pain as a controlling mechanism in the madness of the body to seek pleasure beyond control.[35] Palamas is using Maximus' anthropological ontology of pain and pleasure as a background for developing further the intuitions of Fathers of the Desert and writes about the pleasure that is beyond description and incommunicable.[36] This 'sweetness beyond description' for Palamas, brings us to the state before the Fall; we return back to the satisfaction of our natural desire to know and seek union with God. We cannot describe it, because all our experiences and our abilities to express them cannot cope with the transcendental nature of this experience, which is quite alien to this world.

[30] Ibid. '*Τό γάρ ἅγιον Πνεῦμα' κατά τόν ἐν Πνεύματι λαλοῦντα Νεῖλον, 'συμπάσχον τῇ ἡμετέρᾳ ἀσθενείᾳ, καί ἀκαθάρτοις οὖσιν ἡμῖν ἐπιφοιτᾷ καί, εἴπερ εὑρήσει τόν νοῦν μόνον φιλαλήθως αὐτῷ προσευχόμενον, ἐπιβαίνει αὐτῷ καί πᾶσαν τήν κυκλοῦσαν αὐτόν τῶν λογισμῶν ἤ νοημάτων φάλαγγα ἐξαφανίζει'.*

[31] Ibid. *ὁ ἐλλάμψεως Θεοῦ αἴσθησιν καί ἐνέργειαν τοῖς ἀγεύστοις διά λόγου διηγεῖσθαι βουλόμενος, ὅμοιός ἐστι τῷ τοῖς μή γευσαμένοις μέλιτος τήν αὐτοῦ γλυκύτητα διά λόγων διδάσκειν ἐθέλοντι*

[32] *Nicomachean Ethics* VII, 12–15; X, 1–5 (LCL 73), trans. H. Rackam, vol. XIX (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926).

[33] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* X, 34, 128–39 (LCL 185), trans. R. D. Hicks, vol. II (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925).

[34] Epictetus, *Discourses*, I, 9, 7; III, 11, 2; 24, 43; IV, 4, 32 (LCL 131), trans. W. A. Oldfather, vol. I (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925).

[35] Μαξίμου Ομολογητού, *Επτακόσια Κεφάλαια περί Θεολογίας*, Εκατοντάς Γ, §18, Εκατοντάς ΣΤ, §33, ΜΑΞΙΜΟΥ ΤΟΥ ΟΜΟΛΟΓΗΤΟΥ, ΑΠΑΝΤΑ ΤΑ ΕΡΓΑ 15Δ, ed. and trans. Ignatios Sakales (Θεσσαλονίκη: ΠΑΤΕΡΙΚΑΙ ΕΚΔΟΣΕΙΣ «ΓΡΗΓΟΡΙΟΣ Ο ΠΑΛΑΜΑΣ», 1995). See also *Προς Θαλάσσιον, περί απορiών* Ερώτηση 1 (PG 90: 268D–269D).

[36] Μητροπολίτου Ναυπάκτου και Αγίου Βλασίου Ιεροθέου, *Θεραπευτική Αγωγή. Προεκτάσεις στην «Ορθόδοξη Ψυχοθεραπεία»,* Ε΄ έκδοση (Λειβαδιά: Ιερά Μονή Γενεθλίου της Θεοτόκου [Πελαγίας], 2003).